



# King County Office of the Ombuds

Amy Calderwood, Ombuds-Director

## Transit Ombuds: Re-Introduction and Status Update

Presentation by Brian Camozzi, Deputy Ombuds for Transit

at Access Paratransit Advisory Commission

February 8, 2021

# Outline

- What is the King County Ombuds and its transit function?
- How can the Transit Ombuds help?
- How has the Transit Ombuds function developed so far?
- What is the Transit Ombuds working on?
- What can riders do when they have a problem?

# What is an ombuds?

- An official who promotes confidence in government by working with the public and agencies to investigate and resolve complaints and make recommendations to improve government administration.
  - Independent – outside chain of command
  - Neutral third-party review
  - Broad scope of oversight
  - Ombuds complements and provides oversight for—but does not replace — agency’s internal complaint-handling process
- Historical development
  - Precursors: plebeian tribunes, secret royal inspectors
  - Sweden: Chancellor of Justice 1713, Parliamentary Ombudsman 1809
  - Classical (government), organizational, specialized ombuds

# What is the King County Office of the Ombuds?

- Established in Home Rule Charter of 1969 and in KCC 2.52 to investigate “any administrative act of any administrative agency” on complaint or Ombuds initiative
- Includes Tax Advisor
- Lobbyist Disclosure Act (KCC 1.07): investigate alleged violations
- Employee Code of Ethics (KCC 3.04): investigate alleged violations
- Employee Whistleblower Code (KCC 3.42): investigate employee complaints of “improper governmental action” (IGA) such as violation of law or rule, abuse of authority, gross mismanagement, retaliation for protected activity
  - Includes workplace and employment complaints but not discrimination or labor agreements
- 2006: Deputy Ombuds for Land Use and Rural Affairs begins work
- 2019: Deputy Ombuds for Transit begins work

# What is King County's Transit Ombuds function?

- “[P]rovide a more effective and efficient way for all transit riders, including people with disabilities, to express concerns about transit service and to have those concerns investigated.” (Motion 14938, 2017)
  - Transit Auditor issues 2017 report on Access service cost, quality, equity
  - Access and disabled fixed-route riders raise concerns to County Council
- Review complaints regarding the King County Metro Transit Department
  - Access, fixed-route, other services
  - From riders, Metro employees, members of public
- Review fairness of agency’s own decision-making and complaint-handling processes
  - Supplement (not duplicate) Metro Customer Information Office and other resources

# How can the Transit Ombuds help?

- Listen to your situation and talk through questions, concerns, and complaints
- Offer advice, coaching, and referrals to help identify and navigate options
- Look into your situation and Metro's response; find out and explain what happened and why
- Assist you and Metro to resolve ongoing or recurring problems
- Review agency investigation and conduct independent investigation if appropriate
- Provide conduit to raise concerns with Metro
- Look for patterns; recommend changes to prevent future problems for you and others
  - Improve fairness, accountability, and performance of agency functions
  - Identify gaps in policy or procedures
- Cannot overrule agency decision or force agency to implement recommendations

# Early 2019: Transit Ombuds Work Begins

- Casework and research: focus on Access service and rider complaints; some fixed-route rider complaints
- Begin to evaluate baseline mix of cases
- Introductory meetings, tours, outreach
- Begin attending Access Task Force
- Metro Transit Division becomes a department

# Late 2019: Fixed-Route and Integrated Customer Service

- Casework and research
  - Continue Access work
  - Contribute to update of *Access Ride Guide*
  - Expand focus into fixed-route bus service and disabled riders' experience
  - Metro customer complaint processes
  - Some Metro employee interest in Transit Ombuds services
- New Access contract enacted; complaint-handling integrated into Metro's Customer Information Office

# Early 2020: Assessing Employee-Side Complaints

- Casework and research
  - Surge in contacts and complaints from Metro employees
  - Covid-19: ridership and workplace disruptions, changes in complaint patterns
- Begin identifying new case processes and tools to increase transit ombuds capacity, speed, responsiveness

# Late 2020: Evaluate and Refine

- Casework and research
  - Fixed-route and employee complaints; few Access complaints
  - Work through case backlog
  - Consolidate similar cases for investigation
- Evaluate and refine transit ombuds function; begin building out case processes and tools

# 2021: Status and Goals

- 158 Metro-related cases (74 open) from 2019 to present
  - 29 Access rider cases
  - 37 Fixed-route rider cases
  - 64 Metro employee cases
  - 11 open consolidated/systemic inquiries
- Continue daily casework and research, including complex and consolidated investigations
- Complete and deploy case processes and tools to increase capacity, speed, and responsiveness
- Develop resources to help agencies update policies and advance administrative fairness
- Expand outreach and awareness of transit function

# What should I do if I have a problem with my transit experience?

- Try to resolve problems with agency first, if you can
- Metro Customer Information Office – 206-553-3000
  - Or use comment webforms at bottom of Metro homepage
  - Access, bus, water taxi complaints
  - Bus and water taxi lost and found
- Metro Access Rideline – 206-205-5000
  - Access.RiderServices@kingcounty.gov
  - Making or changing reservations
  - Questions and changes before or on the day of your ride
  - Access lost and found
- Sound Transit Customer Service – 888-889-6368
  - Ombuds does not have jurisdiction over light rail customers

# When and how should I contact the Ombuds about my transit experience?

- Consider the Ombuds if...
  - Metro was unable to resolve your problem or question, or the same problem keeps happening
  - You would like to speak to a neutral third party about your options
- Ombuds case files are subject to the Public Records Act
- By email: [ombudsmail@kingcounty.gov](mailto:ombudsmail@kingcounty.gov)
  - Transit: [transitombuds@kingcounty.gov](mailto:transitombuds@kingcounty.gov)
- By telephone: 206-477-1050 (8:30AM-5PM, Monday-Friday)
  - Brian Direct: 206-263-2625
- By mail: 710 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave, Suite 790, Seattle WA 98104
  - Physical office closed